

Meet me at our spot

—"When I look into your eyes

I just wanna hold you all night."

The Anxiety - Meet Me At Our Spot

Est

The tattoo studio smelled like antiseptic and possibility.

That's what I'd always thought, anyway—that Ink & Ashes carried a particular scent that was equal parts clinical cleanliness and creative potential. The antiseptic was Tui's obsessive hygiene standards, the kind of meticulous care that had built his reputation as one of Bangkok's most trusted tattoo artists. The possibility was everything else: the artwork on the walls, the sound of the tattoo machine humming like a mechanical heartbeat, the way people walked in with skin and walked out with stories permanently etched into their bodies.

I'd been here since 8 AM, tucked into the corner of the studio with my laptop and a cup of coffee that had long since gone cold. Tui had a client in the chair—a young woman getting the line work done for a flower sleeve, her arm stretched out on the padded rest while Tui's needle traced delicate patterns across her skin.

They'd been talking for the past hour, the easy conversation of two people who'd known each other for years. The girl—had been one of Tui's first clients when he'd opened the studio. She'd gotten a small lotus on her ankle back then, and had been returning ever since, building a collection of Tui's work across her body like a living gallery.

"Whatever you think is best," The girl said. "You know I trust you."

"That's a dangerous thing to say to someone holding a needle."

"You've never steered me wrong."

I smiled despite myself, listening to their exchange while my eyes stayed fixed on my laptop screen. The exhibition photos stared back at me—frame after frame of William's work, William's gallery, William's grief made visible and beautiful.

William.

Everything reminded me of William today.

I'd been trying to edit something—anything—that didn't involve him. But the photos from the exhibition led to photos from his house renovation, which led to photos of the garden, which led to that one shot I'd taken of him standing beside the frangipani tree, his hand on the bark, his expression carrying all the complicated

weight of someone who was learning to carry their grief instead of being crushed by it.

I closed that folder and opened another. Older work. Photos from before everything—before the exhibition, before William, before my entire professional life had become entangled with a reclusive painter who was slowly learning to exist in the world again.

These photos were safer. Flowers I'd captured at a botanical garden. Landscapes from a day trip I'd taken last year, back when I still had my terrible corporate job and was trying to remember why I'd ever wanted to be a photographer in the first place. Candid shots of my friends: Hong looking skeptical at something off-camera, Nut mid-laugh, Tui concentrating on a design with his tongue slightly visible between his lips.

And Lego. So many photos of Lego—bright and colorful and endlessly photogenic, the kind of person who couldn't take a bad picture because every angle of his face seemed designed for camera lenses.

I scrolled through the collection, trying to find something to update my portfolio with. Something that would remind potential clients that I was more than just "the guy who photographed William Jakrapatr's comeback." Something that proved I had my own eye, my own vision, my own way of seeing the world.

The email from Nut sat in my inbox, still unanswered.

Three months. Japan, Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia. The dream I'd been carrying since I was a teenager with a borrowed camera and a heart full of impossible ambitions.

I'd been avoiding it for days. Avoiding the decision, avoiding the conversation, avoiding all the complicated feelings that came with wanting something that might mean losing something else.

"You're brooding."

I looked up. Tui had paused his work, his eyes finding mine across the studio with the particular attention of someone who knew me too well.

"I'm editing."

"You're brooding while pretending to edit. There's a difference."

"I didn't realize you could tell the difference from across the room."

"I've known you for seven years. I can tell the difference from across the city."

The girl laughed softly. "Is he always like this?"

"Only when he's being emotionally constipated about something," Tui said, returning his attention to her arm. "Which is approximately always."

"I'm right here." I pointed out.

"I know. That's why I'm saying it loudly enough for you to hear."

I returned my attention to my laptop, but the words on the screen had blurred into meaninglessness. Tui was right—I was brooding. I'd been brooding for days, carrying the weight of decisions I couldn't make and conversations I wasn't ready to have.

Tomorrow was the closing night of the exhibition.

Tomorrow, I would have to face William without the professional excuse that had been keeping us in orbit around each other. No more documentation sessions. No more gallery events. No more legitimate reasons to be in his space, to photograph his face, to watch him navigate the world he'd been hiding from for three years.

Tomorrow, we would have to decide what we were to each other.

And I still didn't know the answer.

At 10 AM, I found myself reading the email from Nut for what had to be the hundredth time. The words hadn't changed. The opportunity hadn't changed. The timeline certainly hadn't changed.

Three months.

Not six weeks, not a shortened commitment, not a "featured photographer" compromise. The full tour. Every country. Every concert. Every behind-the-scenes moment that needed documenting.

Nut had been clear in his follow-up messages: the management company wanted consistency. They wanted one photographer who would travel with the group from start to finish, capturing the narrative arc of the entire tour. There was no flexibility on this point. It was all or nothing.

Three months away from Bangkok.

Three months away from the life I'd been building.

Three months away from William.

The thought sat in my chest like a stone I couldn't swallow. I minimized the email and opened my photo editing software again, but the images blurred in front of my eyes. All I could see was the number. Ninety days. Thirteen weeks. A quarter of a year.

Could the fragile thing William and I were building survive that kind of distance?

We weren't even officially together. We were still in that undefined space between "more than friends" and "actually a couple"—the territory where everything felt possible and nothing was certain. We texted every day, sometimes for hours. We talked on the phone when one of us couldn't sleep. We'd planted seedlings together and watched them grow and pretended that wasn't a metaphor for what was happening between us.

But we hadn't kissed since that first desperate night, months ago. We hadn't made any declarations or promises. We were still feeling our way through the dark, learning to trust each other in increments.

How could something that new, that fragile, survive three months of airports and time zones and the particular loneliness of being far from everyone you cared about?

And yet.

And yet, this was the dream.

Not a version of the dream. Not a compromise. The actual, real, impossible dream that I'd been carrying since I was sixteen years old, flipping through travel photography books and imagining myself capturing the world.

Three months across Asia. Hotels and flights paid for. A day rate that would give me financial stability for the first time in my adult life. Professional recognition that could transform my entire career.

Everything I'd ever wanted.

It was just waiting for me to say yes.

At 11:30, my phone buzzed with a message from William.

William: The seedlings are doing well. Two of them have actual leaves now.

William: [Image attached]

I opened the attachment and found myself smiling despite everything. The photo showed our row of marigold pots—the same ones we'd planted together in his mother's garden, the ones that had seemed so fragile and uncertain just weeks ago. Now they were sprouting, tiny green leaves reaching toward the light with the determined optimism of things that refused to give up.

I didn't respond.

My fingers hovered over the keyboard, trying to compose something casual, something that wouldn't reveal how tangled my thoughts had become. But nothing felt right. Everything I thought to say seemed loaded with subtext I wasn't ready to examine.

The seedlings are growing. We planted them together. Some things are resilient. Some things survive distance and neglect and the particular cruelty of time. But some things don't.

I set down the phone and returned to my editing.

Ten minutes later, it buzzed again.

William: Tomorrow is the closing night.

William: I was wondering if we could talk. Before the event.

William: No pressure. Just—if you're available.

I stared at the messages. Read them three times. Still didn't respond.

The guilt was immediate and overwhelming. Here was William, reaching out, being vulnerable, asking for connection—and I was sitting here paralyzed by a decision I hadn't told him about.

It wasn't fair. None of this was fair.

But I couldn't respond until I knew what I was going to say. And I couldn't know what I was going to say until I knew what I'd decided.

"You're doing it again."

Tui's voice cut through my spiraling thoughts. He'd finished Mint's session—her arm was now wrapped in careful bandages, the aftercare instructions already given—and she was gathering her things to leave.

"Doing what?"

"Staring at your phone like it personally offended you." He walked toward me, pulling off his gloves with practiced efficiency. "Who's texting you?"

"No one."

"William?"

I said nothing.

"It's William." Tui dropped into the chair beside me, close enough that I could smell the antiseptic on his hands and the coffee on his breath. "What did he say?"

"He wants to talk. Before the closing night."

"And you're not responding because...?"

"Because I don't know what to say."

Tui reached over and picked up my phone before I could stop him. He read the messages, his expression shifting from curiosity to exasperation.

"Est. He's asking if you're available to talk. The response is either 'yes' or 'no.' It's not a philosophy exam."

"It's complicated."

"It's only complicated because you're making it complicated." He handed the phone back. "Just text him. Or better yet—call him. You're both grown adults. Use your words."

"I can't. I need to see if he'll reach out first."

Tui stared at me.

"He literally just reached out. He sent you three messages. He asked if you wanted to talk."

"I mean—reach out more. Make more of an effort. Show that he really wants—"

"That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard," Tui interrupted, "and I've heard Hong try to explain NFTs."

"NFTs are actually—"

"They're a scam, and so is whatever you're doing right now." He leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms. "You like him. He clearly likes you. The exhibition is ending tomorrow, which means all your professional excuses are about to disappear. You can either have an actual conversation about what you both want, or you can continue this ridiculous dance of waiting for the other person to make moves while you both die of emotional constipation."

"That's a very aggressive metaphor."

"I'm a very aggressive friend when you're being stupid."

I looked at my phone. At William's messages, still unanswered. At the little green leaves of our seedlings, reaching toward light they couldn't see but somehow knew was there.

"What if I mess it up?"

"Then you mess it up. And you deal with it. And life continues." Tui's voice softened. "But you're not going to know anything until you try. That's how this works, Est. You don't get certainty first. You get courage, and then you find out."

"When did you become a relationship counselor?"

"When my best friend started acting like a lovesick teenager instead of a grown man with a successful photography career." He stood, moving toward the back room. "I'm going to clean up. When I come back, you're going to have responded to those messages. Or I'm going to take your phone and respond for you."

"You wouldn't."

"Try me."

He disappeared into the back, leaving me alone with my phone and the weight of everything I wasn't saying.

I didn't text him.

I called.

The phone rang three times before William answered, his voice carrying that particular uncertainty of someone who hadn't expected an actual phone call.

"Est?"

"Hi."

"Hi."

A pause. The awkward silence of two people who had a thousand things to say and no idea where to start.

"You called," William said finally. "I didn't—I thought you'd text back."

"Tui told me to use my words."

"Tui's a wise man."

"Don't tell him that. His ego doesn't need the help."

A soft laugh through the phone, and something in my chest loosened slightly. This was familiar—the easy banter, the gentle teasing. This was the William I'd been talking to for weeks, the one who'd become something more than a client without either of us naming it.

"I wanted to talk to you," William said. "Before tomorrow. Before everything

becomes—official, or final, or whatever it becomes when the exhibition closes."

"I wanted to talk to you too."

"About what?"

"I don't know. Everything. Nothing." I ran a hand through my hair, grateful he couldn't see me being awkward. "I've been avoiding your messages all morning because I didn't know what to say. And then Tui threatened to respond for me if I didn't get my act together."

"What would Tui have said?"

"I don't want to know. His version of helpful advice usually involves blunt force trauma to my emotional walls."

Another laugh. Warmer this time.

"I don't know what we're doing," William said softly. "I've been trying to figure it out. To put a name to it, to understand what this is. But every time I think I know, something shifts, and I'm uncertain all over again."

"Neither do I. But—" I took a breath. "I don't want to stop. Whatever this is, whatever we're doing. I don't want to stop."

"Even without the exhibition? Without an excuse?"

"Especially without an excuse." The words came out more certain than I felt. "I want to know if this is real. Not just circumstance, not just proximity. Actually real."

A long silence. The kind that stretched out, full of everything unsaid.

"It feels real to me," William said finally. "More real than anything has felt in a long time."

"Then let's find out. Together."

"Together?"

"Together."

I could hear him breathing through the phone—steady, present, alive. We weren't in the same room, but something had shifted. Some wall had come down, some distance had closed.

"Tomorrow," he said. "At the closing. We'll talk properly. Face to face."

"I'd like that."

"I'd like that too." A pause. "Est?"



"Yeah?"

"Thank you. For calling. For—not running away."

"I'm trying not to run away anymore. It's a work in progress."

"That's all any of us can do." His voice was soft. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

"You'll see me tomorrow."

I smiled despite myself. "See you tomorrow, William."

I hung up and stared at my phone.

The conversation had been good. Honest. Real.

And I still hadn't told him about the email.

Three months. Sitting in my inbox. Waiting for an answer.

Tomorrow suddenly felt very far away.

Tui was still cleaning when I finished the call, but he emerged from the back room with a knowing expression the moment I set down my phone.

"Well?"

"We talked."

"And?"

"We're going to talk more. Tomorrow. At the closing."

"See? Was that so hard?"

"Yes, actually. It was extremely hard. I think I lost several years of life to anxiety."

"That's called being a functional adult in a relationship." He grinned, settling back into his work station to organize his supplies. "Welcome to the club."

"I'm not sure 'functional' is the right word for any of this."

"Give yourself some credit. You actually used your words instead of pining silently for another three months. That's growth."

Before I could respond, the studio door chimed.

Lego burst in like a small, colorful hurricane.

Except—not colorful, not today. He was wearing gray, But the outfit was still unmistakably Lego: a flowing gray cardigan over a fitted white shirt, loose gray pants that moved like water around his legs, and platform shoes that added several inches to his already delicate frame. His hair was pulled back in a loose bun, dark strands escaping to frame his face, and the makeup he wore was subtle—just enough to enhance his features without overwhelming them.

And his knee brace—the bulky medical one he'd been wearing for weeks—had been replaced with something smaller. A simple black and gray fabric support that was almost invisible beneath his clothes. Progress. Healing. The body learning to trust itself again.

"I brought food!" he announced, holding up a shoulder bag that was considerably larger than his usual. "And iced tea. And I may have also brought some of the cookies from yesterday because I made too many and Tui's apartment is being invaded by baked goods."

"Your boyfriend's apartment is not being invaded by baked goods." Tui said, but he was already crossing the studio to meet Lego, his expression softening in a way that made something ache in my chest.

"There are cookies on every surface," Lego said seriously. "It's a problem."

"It's a blessing."

"It's both." Lego stretched up on his tiptoes to press a quick kiss to Tui's lips—casual, natural, the gesture of two people who had become comfortable with each other's presence. The kind of easy intimacy that came from choosing each other every day. "I missed you."

"You saw me six hours ago."

"That's a very long time."

"You're ridiculous."

"You love it."

Tui's arm wrapped around Lego's waist, pulling him closer. "I do."

I watched them from my corner of the studio, feeling something that was equal parts warmth and envy. They'd found each other—properly found each other, after months of circling and hesitation. Tui, who had spent years convincing himself he was too damaged for someone as bright as Lego. Lego, who had waited with the particular patience of someone who knew what they wanted and refused to give up on it.

They'd made it work. Despite the age difference, despite Tui's baggage, despite all the reasons it shouldn't have happened.

Maybe that was the point. Maybe love wasn't about waiting for the perfect circumstances. Maybe it was about choosing someone—flaws and complications and all—and figuring out the rest as you went.

"Stop staring at us like we're a nature documentary," Tui said, catching my eye over Lego's shoulder. "It's weird."

"I'm not staring."

"You're absolutely staring. You have your 'observing subjects in their natural habitat' face on."

"I don't have a face for that."

"You definitely do. It's the same face you use when you're photographing something without people noticing."

Lego turned to look at me, his expression shifting from affectionate to concerned in approximately half a second. "P'Est! Why do you look like you haven't slept in three days?"

"I slept."

"You look like you argued with sleep and lost."

"That's my normal face."

"It's not your normal face. Your normal face has less..." He waved a hand vaguely. "Existential crisis."

"I'm not having an existential crisis."

Tui and Lego exchanged a look—the particular silent communication of people who'd spent enough time together to have entire conversations through eye contact.

"He's having an existential crisis." Tui confirmed.

"I can see that." Lego agreed.

"I'm right here."

"We know. That's how we can see the existential crisis happening."

Lego's food was, predictably, incredible. We'd migrated to the small patio behind

the studio—a concrete square barely big enough for three people, surrounded by boxes of recycling waiting to be collected and plants that Lego had insisted on adding during his frequent visits. He'd transformed the utilitarian space into something almost charming, with hanging ferns and small succulents arranged on salvaged shelving. A string of fairy lights wound through the greenery, though they weren't lit during the day.

The containers from Lego's bag contained a variety of dishes that smelled like home and comfort. Grilled chicken with a lemongrass herb coating that made my mouth water. A vegetable curry with coconut milk, fragrant with galangal and kaffir lime. Perfectly fluffy jasmine rice. A small container of fresh spring rolls with peanut dipping sauce. And, inexplicably, a separate container of what appeared to be hand-cut fruit arranged in aesthetic patterns.

"Did you make all of this?" I asked, helping myself to a second portion of the curry.

"Most of it. The rice is from yesterday—I made too much and had to freeze some." Lego was already pouring iced tea into mismatched cups he'd apparently also brought. The tea was butterfly pea flower, naturally purple and shimmering, because of course Lego wouldn't bring ordinary iced tea when magical-looking tea was an option. "The curry is new, though. I've been experimenting with spices."

"When do you sleep?" I asked genuinely. "Between the dancing and the modeling and the cooking and the taking care of literally everyone you know?"

"Sleep is for people who don't have perfectly calibrated energy management systems." He handed me a cup with a flourish. "Also, I crashed for fourteen hours last weekend and woke up not knowing what year it was. So there's that."

Tui snorted. "He called me in a panic because he thought he'd slept through an entire semester."

"I could have slept through an entire semester. Time is an illusion."

"You were asleep for one night."

"It felt longer!"

"That's because you pushed yourself too hard the week before," Tui said, and there was genuine concern beneath his teasing. "You're still recovering. You need to actually rest."

"I am resting! This is rest! I'm sitting in the sun eating curry with my favorite people!"

"Yesterday you rested by reorganizing my entire apartment while I was at the studio."

"Reorganizing is soothing. It's like meditation but useful."

"You alphabetized my spice rack."

"Your spice rack was a disaster, P'Tui. The cumin was next to the cinnamon. That's chaos."

"They're both C-spices!"

"That's not how alphabetization works!"

I laughed despite myself, feeling some of the tension in my shoulders ease. This was what I'd missed during my years of isolation and professional dissatisfaction—the simple joy of being around people who cared about each other, who teased and supported in equal measure.

Tui reached over and took Lego's hand, their fingers interlacing with the ease of long practice. They looked at each other for a moment—something private passing between them—and then Tui lifted Lego's hand to his lips and pressed a soft kiss to his knuckles.

It was such a small gesture. Such a simple thing. But watching it made my chest ache with something I couldn't name.

We ate in comfortable silence for a while, the sounds of the city filtering through from beyond the studio walls. Somewhere nearby, construction was happening—the constant soundtrack of Bangkok's eternal reinvention. Birds sang in Lego's hanging plants. The ice in our tea clicked gently against the cups.

It was peaceful. Simple. The kind of moment that didn't ask anything of you except presence.

"So," Tui said eventually, setting down his chopsticks with the particular deliberateness that meant he was about to ask something important. "Are you going to tell us what's going on, or are we going to have to guess?"

I looked at him. Then at Lego, who was watching me with an expression of gentle concern.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you've been acting weird for days. More than normal weird. Something's going on, and it's not just about William." Tui's eyes were knowing. "You're carrying something. I can see it."

I should have expected this. Tui had always been able to read me—it was annoying and comforting in equal measure.

"It's nothing."

"It's obviously not nothing."

"It's—" I stopped. Started again. "I need help. Buying clothes. For tomorrow."

Lego's eyes lit up. "Clothes shopping?"

"For the closing night. I don't have anything appropriate, and I've been putting off dealing with it because—" I gestured vaguely. "Because I'm apparently incapable of basic adult tasks when I'm emotionally compromised."

"That's not what you're actually worried about," Tui said.

"It's part of what I'm worried about."

"What's the other part?"

I said nothing.

"Est."

"I can't—not yet. I need to figure some things out first."

Tui studied me for a long moment. I could see him weighing whether to push further, whether to use the particular skills of friendship that let him extract confessions from me when I didn't want to give them.

Then he sighed.

"Fine. Keep your secrets." He turned to Lego. "Can you take him shopping? I have another client at three, and someone needs to make sure he doesn't show up to William's exhibition closing in cargo pants."

"I would never wear cargo pants to an exhibition closing."

"You wore cargo pants to Hong's exhibition opening."

"That was different!"

"It was embarrassing is what it was." Tui stood, gathering their empty containers.

"Lego, please save him from himself."

Lego was already standing, bouncing on his heels with the particular energy of someone who had just been given a mission. "Shopping trip! This is going to be so fun. I know exactly where to take you."

"Should I be worried?"

"Only if you hate looking amazing."

Before they left the patio, Tui caught Lego's arm and pulled him into a proper kiss—not the quick peck from earlier, but something longer, softer, the kind of kiss that said I'll miss you even though you'll only be gone for a few hours.

"Be good." Tui murmured against Lego's lips.

"I'm always good."

"You're occasionally good. Mostly you're chaos."

"Lovable chaos."

"The most lovable." Another kiss. "Text me when you're done. I want to know what you picked for him."

"I'll send pictures."

"Of Est in clothes?"

"Of Est looking like a functional human being. It's going to be a whole transformation montage."

"I'm standing right here." I said, for what felt like the hundredth time that day.

"We know." they said in unison, and then Lego was dragging me toward the door while Tui's laughter followed us out.

The mall Lego chose was in a part of Bangkok I rarely visited—one of those multi-story complexes that seemed to contain entire ecosystems of consumerism. Floors of fashion, floors of food, floors of entertainment. The kind of place where you could enter at nine in the morning and emerge at sunset having lost all sense of time and financial responsibility.

Lego navigated it with the confidence of someone who had been here many times before. He led me through crowds of shoppers, past displays of things I couldn't afford, toward a section of the mall that was quieter and more deliberately curated.

"These stores are good for formal wear that doesn't look boring," he explained, pushing open the door to a boutique that smelled like expensive leather and quiet desperation. "They do alterations same-day if you ask nicely."

"How do you know so much about men's formal wear?"

"Modeling." He started browsing through racks with practiced efficiency. "You learn where to find clothes that photograph well without making you look like you're attending a funeral."

"That seems like a specific skill."

"It is. It's also why I'm perfect for this mission."

He pulled out a shirt—dark blue, with subtle textural details that caught the light—and held it up against my chest, assessing.

"Too safe," he decided, returning it to the rack. "We need something that says 'I'm a professional photographer who is also capable of being attractive when the situation demands it.'"

"Is that a specific look?"

"It's a vibe."

He moved through the store with the determination of someone on a quest, pulling options and discarding them with equal speed. I followed in his wake, feeling somewhat like a prop in someone else's shopping montage.

As he examined a row of jackets, his fingers pausing on different fabrics, he spoke without looking at me.

"Something's up, isn't it? It's not just P'Tui's imagination."

I should have expected this. Lego had always been perceptive—it came with being a model, with being someone who had learned to read rooms and faces from a young age. You couldn't survive in his world without developing the ability to see beneath surfaces.

"I don't know what you mean."

"P'Est." He turned to face me, still holding a charcoal jacket in his hands. "I know what your face looks like when you're just tired, and I know what it looks like when you're carrying something heavy. This is the heavy face."

"I have a heavy face?"

"You have several faces. This is the one that makes me want to bring you soup and ask if you need to cry."

"That's very specific."

"I'm a very specific person." He held up the jacket. "Try this on. And while you're in the fitting room, you can tell me what's actually going on."

I took the jacket. It was soft, well-made, the kind of thing that would look good in photographs without being ostentatious. Lego had good instincts.

"How do you know something's going on?"



"Because you've been weird for days. Because P'Tui is worried about you, which means I'm worried about you. Because you talked to William on the phone today and you didn't come out of it happy—you came out of it more stressed than before."

"How do you know I talked to William?"

"The expression on your face when you hung up. You looked like someone who had done something brave and immediately regretted it."

"That's... disturbingly accurate."

Lego pointed toward the fitting rooms with the jacket still in his hand. "Go. Try things on. Talk to me through the curtain."

The fitting room became a confessional. I changed into different combinations while Lego sat outside the door, his voice carrying clearly through the curtain. And somehow, in that strange privacy—me in various states of dress, him invisible but present—the words started to come.

"There's a job opportunity," I said, adjusting the collar of another shirt. "Nut sent it to me weeks ago. It's—" I took a breath. "It's everything I've ever wanted."

"What kind of job?"

"Photography. For a tour. Three months traveling across Asia—Japan, Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia. All the places I've always wanted to see." I stared at my reflection in the mirror. The man looking back at me seemed tired. Uncertain. Nothing like the confident photographer I'd always imagined myself becoming. "It's my dream, Lego. The thing I've been talking about since I was a teenager with a borrowed camera. And it's actually happening."

"That sounds amazing."

"It is amazing. It's also—" I stopped. "The timing is terrible."

"Because of William."

"Because of William. Because of whatever we're becoming. Because I've spent the last weeks building something with him, and now I have to choose between that something and the dream I've been chasing my entire life."

"Why do you have to choose?"

I pulled back the curtain, meeting Lego's eyes. He was sitting on the small bench outside the fitting rooms, his posture relaxed, his expression attentive.

"Because it's three months. Three whole months away. In different countries,

different time zones. How can something this new, this fragile, survive that kind of distance? We're not even officially together. We haven't even defined what we are."

"Does three months change how you feel about him?"

"What?"

"If you went away for three months—would you stop caring about him?"

"No. Of course not."

"Then why would he stop caring about you?"

The question was so simple. So obvious. And yet it hit me like a physical blow.

"That's not—it's more complicated than that."

"Is it?" Lego stood, taking the shirt I'd been holding and examining it critically. "This one's too light. It washes you out. Try the darker blue."

He handed me a different option and gently pushed me back behind the curtain.

"P'Est," he said, his voice carrying through the fabric, "I've known William my whole life. Literally my whole life—we met when we were children. I've seen him at his worst, locked away in that apartment, refusing to see anyone, convinced that isolation was the only way to survive. And I've seen him now. The person he's becoming."

"You have."

"Do you know what's different about him now?"

"What?"

"He fights for things. Before, when anything got hard, he'd retreat. He'd hide. He'd convince himself that losing people was easier than risking them leaving. But now —" I could hear the smile in Lego's voice. "Now he planted seedlings with you. He sends you pictures of their progress. He called you to talk about feelings instead of disappearing into his studio for a week."

"That's—"

"That's growth. Real, actual, hard-won growth." A pause. "And you want to know what I think?"

"What?"

"I think if William can't wait three months for you while you chase your dream, he's a fool. But I also think he's not a fool. I think he's someone who's learning what it

means to love someone without consuming them."

I stood in the fitting room, staring at my reflection, processing Lego's words.

"You're not telling me to stay?"

"Why would I tell you to stay?"

"Because William is your best friend. Your childhood friend. Wouldn't you want—"

"I want William to be happy." Lego's voice was firm. "And I want you to be happy. And I think—I really, genuinely think—that both of those things are possible. You can have both of them, P'Est. The dream and the person. They're not mutually exclusive."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I had to learn the same thing. With P'Tui." A soft laugh. "I spent so long convincing myself that I had to choose between my dancing and my relationship. That I couldn't have ambition and love at the same time. That being with someone meant giving things up."

"But you didn't."

"No. Because P'Tui never asked me to. He supports my dancing. He comes to my showcases. He tells me to rest when I'm pushing too hard, but he never tells me to stop pursuing what I love." I could hear Lego shifting on the bench. "That's what real partnership looks like. Not giving things up—figuring out how to grow together, even when you're growing in different directions."

I thought about that. About Tui and Lego, who had built something real despite all the reasons it shouldn't have worked. About William, who was learning to exist in the world again after years of hiding. About myself, standing in a fitting room with clothes that didn't quite fit and a decision that felt impossible.

"In the end, it's your decision, P'Est," Lego said softly. "And it's your dream. It would be a little sad if you let it slip through your fingers just like that."

I pulled back the curtain again.

Lego looked up at me, his expression kind and certain in a way that made my chest ache.

"You really think I can have both?"

"I really do." He stood, reaching up to adjust the collar of my shirt. "But you have to believe it too. You have to be willing to try."

"What if it doesn't work?"

"Then at least you'll know. You won't spend the rest of your life wondering what might have happened if you'd been brave enough to reach for everything you wanted."

I looked at my reflection again. The shirt fit better than the others. The color was right. I looked like someone who might be capable of making difficult decisions.

"This one," Lego said, smoothing the fabric across my shoulders. "This is the one."

He was talking about the shirt.

But maybe he was talking about everything else too.

The bubble tea place Lego chose was aggressively pastel. Pink walls, mint green furniture, staff wearing aprons decorated with cartoon cats. The kind of establishment that photographed extremely well and attracted customers primarily through Instagram visibility.

Lego ordered something complicated involving taro, coconut, multiple toppings, and a specific ice-to-tea ratio that required negotiations with the barista. I ordered black milk tea because I was a simple person with simple needs, and also because the menu had approximately forty-seven options and I'd panicked.

We found a table by the window and settled in, shopping bags piled at our feet.

"So," Lego said, stirring his purple-gray drink with a biodegradable straw. "Tell me about the tour. All of it."

I told him everything.

The email from Nut. The countries I'd be visiting. The group I'd be photographing. The day rate that was more than I'd ever made in my life. The way the management company had been clear that it was all or nothing—three months, no shortened commitment, no featured photographer compromise.

"They want consistency," I explained. "One photographer for the entire tour. Someone who can capture the full narrative arc, who'll be there for every stop, who'll become part of the team instead of just passing through."

"That makes sense."

"It does. It's just—" I stared into my tea. "Three months is a long time."

"It is."

"And William and I are so new. We haven't even defined what we are. How can I ask him to wait for something that isn't even a real relationship yet?"

Lego set down his drink and looked at me with an expression that was far too wise for someone his age.

"Can I tell you something that might sound harsh?"

"Go ahead."

"You're overthinking this."

"That's not harsh. That's accurate."

"Let me finish." He held up a hand. "You're overthinking this because you're trying to predict how William will react. You're trying to make the decision based on what he might feel, what he might need, what he might want. But that's not how decisions work. You can't make choices for other people. You can only make choices for yourself."

"I know that."

"Do you? Because it sounds like you're trying to decide for William whether he can handle three months of distance. But that's his decision to make. Not yours."

The words hit harder than they should have.

"You're right," I admitted. "I am doing that."

"So stop." Lego's voice was gentle but firm. "Ask yourself what you want. Just you. Separate from William, separate from fear, separate from what anyone else might think."

"I want the job," I said immediately. "I want to travel and photograph and become the photographer I've always imagined I could be."

"And William?"

"I want him too. I want to see where this goes. I want to find out if what we're building is real."

"Then do both."

"You make it sound so simple."

"It's not simple. But it's not impossible either." Lego picked up his drink again. "You accept the job. You have an honest conversation with William about what it means. And then you trust him to make his own choice about whether he can wait."

"What if he can't?"

"Then you'll know. And you'll deal with it. But you can't protect yourself from that

possibility by giving up your dream. That just means you lose both things instead of maybe losing one."

I stared at him—at this twenty-year-old wrapped in gray and carrying wisdom he shouldn't have earned yet.

"When did you get so smart?"

"I've always been smart. I just distract people with sparkles and cookies." He grinned. "Also, I've been in therapy for three years. You pick up some communication skills."

"That explains a lot."

"It explains everything." He raised his bubble tea in a mock toast. "To new adventures. And to being brave enough to have them."

I raised my own cup. "To terrifying bravery."

We clinked plastic against plastic, and something in my chest finally, finally settled.

I accepted the job at 11:47 PM.

Sitting in my apartment, the shopping bags from the mall arranged neatly by my closet, the new clothes hanging and ready for tomorrow, I opened my laptop and typed the email I'd been avoiding for weeks.

Nut,

Yes. I'm in.

Three months. The full tour. Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia.

All of it.

I have one condition: I need to finish the exhibition documentation first. The closing is tomorrow. After that, I'm free. And—please don't tell anyone yet. I need to figure out how to have this conversation myself. Especially with William.

Thank you for believing in me. Thank you for not giving up when I was being indecisive. Thank you for giving me the chance to do this.

Let's make this amazing.

Est

I hit send before I could change my mind.

The response came almost immediately, because Nut apparently never slept:

EST!!!!

YES. FINALLY. I've been refreshing my email for DAYS. Weeks, actually. I was starting to think you were going to ghost this opportunity and I was going to have to stage an intervention.

I won't say a word. Your secret is safe with me. But you have to tell him eventually—William, I mean. Before the internet figures it out. Tours get announced. Things get photographed. The world is small.

Also: You deserve this. In case no one told you today. You deserve every single incredible thing that's about to happen to you.

Let's make it INCREDIBLE.

Nut

I closed my laptop and looked around my apartment.

The resurrection plant was still green, still reaching toward light. The painting of my hands still sat on its small table, evidence of attention I was only beginning to understand. My camera bag was packed and ready for tomorrow—the final documentation session, the closing night, the end of one chapter and the beginning of another.

I thought about William. About the conversation we still needed to have. About the fear and the hope and the complicated mess of feelings I'd been carrying for months.

I thought about the dream—finally, actually happening. Planes and countries and photographs of places I'd only imagined.

I thought about Lego's words: You can have both of them. The dream and the person.

Three months was a long time. Long enough for a lot of things to change. Long enough for feelings to fade or grow or transform into something unrecognizable. But it was also a beginning. A chance to become the person I'd always wanted to be. A test of whether what William and I were building was strong enough to survive distance and time and the particular challenges of loving someone who was learning to love themselves.

I wouldn't know until I tried.

Tomorrow, I would tell William about the job.

Tomorrow, we would have the conversation we'd been circling around for months.

Tomorrow, everything would change. But tonight, I was going to sit here and breathe. Feel the weight of the decision I'd made. Let myself be excited about the dream I was finally claiming.

Tonight, I was choosing myself. And tomorrow, I would find out if that choice had room for someone else too.

My phone buzzed just before midnight.

William: I can't sleep.

William: I keep thinking about tomorrow. About what happens after.

William: Is it strange that I'm more scared of the exhibition ending than I was of it beginning?

I smiled at the screen, my heart doing something complicated in my chest.

Est: It's not strange. Endings are terrifying.

William: Beginnings are supposed to be scarier.

Est: Says who?

William: Every motivational poster ever made.

Est: Motivational posters lie. They exist to sell uncomfortable wall art.

William: That's cynical.

Est: I'm a realist.

William: Same thing, according to optimists.

I laughed, alone in my apartment, at a text conversation happening past midnight. This was what we'd become—two people who could make each other laugh through screens, who found comfort in digital connection while working up the courage for the in-person kind.

Est: I have something to tell you. Tomorrow.

William: Good something or bad something?

Est: Different something. Important something.

William: That's not reassuring.

Est: It's not meant to be reassuring. It's meant to be honest.



A pause. The typing indicator appeared, disappeared, appeared again.

William: I have something to tell you too.

Est: Good or bad?

William: Terrifying.

Est: That's also not reassuring.

William: Honesty, remember?

Est: Right. Honesty.

Another pause. Then:

William: Tomorrow. We'll tell each other our terrifying things.

Est: Tomorrow.

William: Est?

Est: Yeah?

William: Whatever happens—whatever you need to tell me—I'm glad I met you. I'm glad you came to photograph my exhibition. I'm glad we planted seedlings together and talked about resilience and learned to be in each other's lives.

My eyes burned. The words blurred on the screen.

Est: I'm glad too.

William: Even if everything changes tomorrow?

Est: Even then.

William: Goodnight, Est.

Est: Goodnight, William.

I set down my phone and looked at the ceiling.

Tomorrow, I would tell him about the three-month tour. I would watch his face as I explained that I was leaving, that I was chasing a dream I'd been carrying since I was a teenager, that I wanted him to wait but couldn't promise it would be worth the waiting.

Tomorrow, he would tell me his terrifying thing, whatever it was.

Tomorrow, we would have to figure out if this fragile, beautiful thing we were building could survive everything we were about to throw at it.

But tonight—

Tonight, I had his words echoing in my mind. I'm glad I met you. I'm glad we planted seedlings together.

Tonight, I had the dream finally within reach.

Tonight, I had the hope that maybe—just maybe—Lego was right. That you could have both things. That love and ambition weren't enemies. That some things really were resilient enough to survive.

The resurrection plant sat in my window, its green leaves catching the streetlight.

Tomorrow, everything would change.

But tonight, I was going to let myself believe that change could be good.